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Cultural Closeness and Remoteness in Chinese Fashion Magazines

Introduction

Fashion and lifestyle magazines emerged in post-Maoist China in the context of economic reform and opening to the outside world, which had far-reaching effects not only in the economical, but also the social and cultural spheres. They were also the outcome of an official initiative that began in the late 1980s and gained impetus during the 1990s, aimed at reducing state funding and marketization of the media. Chinese best-selling fashion magazines are not subsidized by the state, and their success is built upon effective marketing strategies. They present their target readership – the newly affluent middle class – with images of modernity and world fashion.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of cultural studies in China. Chinese scholars enthusiastically took up research into new local cultural phenomena, especially those perceived as cultural imports from the broadly understood West, as they offered an opportunity for discussions on globalization and Western cultural imperialism. Fashion magazines, especially Chinese editions of well-known Western magazines, became a popular subject of analysis conducted within the trendy methodological framework of critical studies. As such, they were also frequent targets of more or less harsh criticism for promoting Western consumerism, transforming women into objects of the male gaze and indiscriminate copying of Western models (Zhang, 2002; Guo, 2003; Meng, 2004; Liu & Qi, 2006, and others).

My qualitative study of over 500 articles published between 1988 and 2008 by two upscale Chinese fashion magazines (《时尚》 *Shishang*

and 《世界时装之苑》 *Shijie shizhuang zhi yuan*), currently issued as mainland Chinese editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* respectively, was aimed at reconstructing the woman image that the two magazines propose to their readers, and proved that Chinese scholars' criticism was not entirely well-founded. The space allotted to this paper is insufficient for a detailed presentation of my research results, which can be found elsewhere (Zemanek, 2013). Here I will only address the last accusation mentioned above, i.e. that fashion magazines excessively and thoughtlessly copy Western models without heeding the real situation and needs of their Chinese readers. My analysis showed that in spite of their affiliation with Western partners, both analyzed titles, but especially *Shishang*, create a woman image that is both firmly anchored in the local culture and has a marked global aspect. I will discuss several articles from *Shishang* and show that this magazine displays a clear consciousness of its own and its readers' positioning within the local and global, and that its journalists are quite adept at drawing upon this consciousness in order to achieve specific persuasive goals.

As a consequence of employing such rhetorical devices, *Shishang* arouses in its readers a "global cultural awareness" and constructs a global cultural framework within which they can position themselves (Tomlinson, 1999, pp. 30-31). It brings the global into the local without actual spatial displacement (Tomlinson, 1999, pp. 9-10; Larkin, 1997, p. 407). It also stimulates readers' imagination, considered by Appadurai to be an important constitutive trait of modern subjectivity. The key role played by imagination is that of mobilizing individuals and groups of people by making them aware of the possibility of joining communities and public spheres that transgress geographical and national boundaries (Appadurai, 2005, pp. 12-22). The media play a major role in arousing people's imagination, as they make available to their audience experiences and possible lives of people in other geographical locations. Media viewers or readers thus obtain the possibility of participating "in the imagined realities of other cultures as part of their daily lives" (Larkin, 1997, p. 407), and of perceiving their own lives through the prism of these realities. In other words, media provide their audience with a glimpse into what Larkin calls "parallel modernities": "the coexistence in space and time of multiple economic, religious and cultural flows that are often subsumed within the term 'modernity'" (*ibid.*).

Shishang creates this kind of global awareness in many different forms; from among them, I will discuss in this paper a certain discourse strategy which consists in skilful handling of cultural closeness and remoteness. Such manipulation of cultural distance can be seen, for instance, in the emphasis placed in articles on those traits of the characters they depict

(women living in China, but also celebrities who live abroad, such as the Chinese-American actress Joan Chen) that mark them out as members of the Chinese national or cultural community and differentiate this community from others: the Chinese language, cultural heritage, or Chinese citizenship. This argumentative device is one of the elements that make up this magazine's nationalistic project (see Zemanek, 2013, pp. 210-217).

Here, however, I would like to focus on another aspect of this strategy: the way in which article authors manipulate cultural distance in the case of various issues which are relevant and significant in the local context as part of the image of modern, successful womanhood promoted by *Shishang*. These issues may be new, and therefore difficult to accept for the magazine's Chinese readers, or potentially controversial, as they may tread on the frail borders of legal correctness. Reducing and increasing cultural distance by means of placing these issues against a local or foreign background allows the authors to play upon their significance for Chinese readers, or to avert the danger of overstepping the limits of legal or moral acceptability.

Shishang was founded in 1993 as a local magazine; since 1998 it has been issued as the PRC edition of *Cosmopolitan* and is now one of the most popular upscale fashion and lifestyle magazines in mainland China. Its success was due to a cleverly devised marketing strategy, deeply grounded in local realities and built around the magazine's target readers: white-collar professionals, a group which was emerging in the 1990s. This strategy was maintained after the establishment of collaboration with Hearst Magazines (the publisher of *Cosmopolitan*) and is responsible for the fact that *Shishang* still significantly differs from Western editions of *Cosmo*: it is targeted at well-educated, financially and professionally successful women in their thirties, it downplays sex-related topics and instead focuses on lifestyle, career and fashion.

The whole project of which the present article is a part was conducted within the framework of critical studies. Because of the large dimensions of the text sample chosen for analysis, I reconstructed the various categories that constitute the image of womanhood, their dimensions and properties, according to the procedures proposed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Konecki, 2000; Charmaz, 2009). For more in-depth discussions of particular texts, I used critical discourse analysis (Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 2001). I placed the woman image I thus reconstructed against a larger historical, cultural and social background, which is what I will do in this paper as well.

The strategy of increasing or reducing cultural distance will be discussed in the context of three topics brought up in various articles contained in *Shishang*:

- the issue of feminism and defending women's rights, as depicted in several articles from 1998, 1999, 2002 and 2003;
- the topics of marriage, motherhood, career and individual choice, discussed at length in an article published in 2003;
- the topic of women's age and relationships, somewhat jocularly discussed in a feature at the end of one issue from 2003.

Feminism in *Shishang*

Ever since its first issues, this magazine displayed sensitivity to gender-specific problems. Articles from 1993 and 1994 mention differences between women and men, which give rise to gender-specific reactions and expectations from others. However, it is only in the late 1990s that the magazine also starts to question traditional or popular convictions about and attitudes toward women, and to point out specific measures that should or have been taken in order to make changes in their unfavourable situation.

In the issues of 1998 and 1999 selected for analysis, most problems and proposals for change are to be found in a column entitled “脑震荡 Brainstorm/Global Info” (*Naozhendang*), which occurs in 5 out of 6 analyzed issues and offers information on the situation of women outside China. One of these articles¹ discusses a publication on the way women influence global food security, issued by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. It points out that although women produce most of all the food that is grown in the world (especially in developing countries), they are also victims of discrimination in respect of access to education in agricultural technology, which proves that the efforts made by the feminist movement are still insufficient. Another article² presents an individual victim of discrimination: Jerrie Cobb, an American who could not obtain Mercury astronaut status although she had passed all of the tests, on the basis of a requirement that excluded women. She subsequently lobbied in the Congress for support for adding women to the astronaut programme, with no success. The same column also includes information on the web portal of a US organization, The White House Project, which aims at increasing women's political consciousness and representation, up to

¹ Yangyang 洋洋. “Nüren yanghuo shijie – tamen you dedaole shenme” (女人养活世界——她们又得到了什么, Women Feed the World – but What Have They Got Instead?). 《时尚 *Cosmopolitan*》, 1998/18(51), p. 22.

² Chen Xu 陈叙. “67 nian, buceng minmie ta de taikong meng” (67年, 不曾泯灭她的太空梦, The Year 1967 Did Not Put an End to Her Dream of Outer Space). 《时尚 *Cosmopolitan*》, 1999/6(57), p. 18.

the highest official positions in the state.³ An issue from 1999 includes a text⁴ on Western female singers who, by creating their own, aesthetically valuable music, contribute to debunking the stereotypical association of female singers only with a pretty appearance.

Such articles expand the readers' horizon by making them aware of problems that women may encounter and possibilities of dissent. However, at the same time they keep the issues of discrimination, feminism and women's rights at a safe distance from local realities, by placing them into a foreign context. In the articles mentioned above, no reference is made to the situation of Chinese women. The article on women singers ends with the following universal statement, which can also be applied to women in China:

“新世纪的女性，在安定而从容的生活态度中，在人生的波峰谷底，要是都能有着如此的自信与坚强，女性的自主和独立便不囿于仅仅只是一个口号。”

“If women of the new century could display such self-confidence and strength along with a calm, settled approach to life in all its ups and downs, women's independence and self-reliance would not remain a mere slogan.”

Problems in China are hinted at (but not delved into) in one article⁵ on the possibility of hiring a private lawyer by women who are exposed to sexual harassment, home violence and their husbands' adultery. The lawyer Guo Jianmei, portrayed in another article⁶, mentions that she offers counseling services to women who are harmed in various ways and cannot defend themselves. However, no specific cases of women's rights encroachment and sexual discrimination are mentioned in relation to Chinese women, and no such women are depicted as protesting or fighting for their own rights. Women's independence and self-determination may be praised in general terms in the article on female singers, but another text that specifically refers to Chinese women's potential choice to

³ “Meiguo minjian longzhong tuichu nüzongtong houxuanren” (美国民间隆重推出女总统候选人, Common People in America Propose Female Candidates for President). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/3(54), p. 20.

⁴ Huang Weiyu 黄伟瑜. “Changchu nüxing de zizhu” (唱出女性的自主, Singing of Women Who Are Their Own Masters). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/6(57), p. 26.

⁵ Li Jing 李晶, Zhengpeng 正鹏. “Qing zhao wo de lüshi tan” (请找我的律师谈, Please Talk to My Lawyer). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/3(54), pp. 50-51.

⁶ Wang Xumei 王绪梅, Wu Muxing 邬沐兴. “Guo Jianmei: yi ban chuantong, yi ban qianwei” (郭建梅：一半传统一半前卫, Guo Jianmei: Half Traditional, Half Avant-garde). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/3(54), p. 47.

become single mothers⁷ warns about the danger of going too far in one's autonomy. The concept of feminism is also placed in a foreign or international context: one text⁸ mentions the influence of Western feminism on Chinese women, which implies that there is no such movement, or such ideas, in China itself. The only instance of bringing feminism over to Chinese ground is a long article that depicts women as victims of violence against the background of the Jakarta riots in 1998.⁹ However, here feminism is only a pretext for making a markedly nationalistic point (see Zemanek, 2010).

The magazine's keeping women's problems and feminism at a safe distance until the late 1990s may echo a general reluctance in China's official and academic circles to adopt terms susceptible of connoting "bourgeois feminism" or hegemonic Western concepts. The former is related to women's activism in China at the end of the 19th century and during the first decades of the 20th century, as part of the global feminist movement, which the CCP rejected as bourgeois. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, it was replaced by a "state feminism" under the auspices of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which became the only official organization to represent women's interests. The discourse of women and political activism were monopolized by the ACWF until the mid-1980s, when gender studies programmes were established in higher education. Women's and gender studies gained impetus during the 1990s, especially after the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. A further step towards the state's retreat was the emergence in the 1990s of social organizations that directly addressed women's problems – rural to urban migration, unemployment, domestic violence, sexual assault, female infanticide, and so on (although many of these organizations were supervised by the ACWF). However, during the 1990s Chinese scholars were still wary of adopting the term "feminism" because of its assumed association with Western values. Instead of Western feminism, which they rejected as too extreme, they wished to formulate a local, Chinese understanding of the women's movement. Nonetheless, the onset of the 21st century saw the emergence of a new group of nonconformist young urban activists with a liking for glamorous campaigns, who readily embrace the term "feminism" in order to affirm a form of female empowerment related to sex and consumption (see

⁷ Zhou Jian 周俭. "Yao haizi buyao nanren?" (要孩子不要男人?, Wanting a Child, but Without a Man?). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/6(57), pp. 66-67.

⁸ Guo Hui 郭晖. "Hui jia zuomeng qu" (回家做梦去, Go Back Home and Dream Your Dreams). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1999/10(61), p. 67.

⁹ Chen Bingmiao 陈冰淼, Wang Xumei 王绪梅. "Tebie guanzhu: heshi nüren cai neng mianzao baoli?" (特别关注: 何时女人才能免遭暴?, In the Spotlight: When Will Women Stop Being Victims of Violence?). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 1998/15(48), pp. 60-63.

Edwards, 2008). The fact that feminism has become a fashionable label may explain why in later articles (2002-2003 and 2007-2008) *Shishang* no longer avoids placing this concept in a local context.

Traditional roles and individual choices

My subsample from 2002-2003 is the most vocal in advocating women's rights and empowerment. The most radical views are expressed in an article¹⁰ from the column entitled “3F – Fun, Fearless, Female 女人” (3F *Nüren*), which has a special place within the magazine as it depicts women who embody key local values promoted by *Shishang* under the worldwide *Cosmo* slogan. The three young women who give their opinions are of Chinese descent, born and brought up in the US and Australia, who worked in China at the time they were interviewed. They raise topics such as career, marriage, women's age and the criteria for making important decisions and choices. They speak about their own experiences and beliefs, but also relate to the views of Chinese women they have met in China.

The article's first sentence establishes distance between the “ABC women” (American/Australian Born Chinese) and the community referred to by means of the personal pronoun 我们 *women* (“we”):

“她们和我们这些土生土长的中国女孩有点不一样。”

“They are quite different from us girls born and raised in China.”

However, soon afterwards this distance is reduced, and cultural closeness is brought into the foreground. The word 根基 *genji* (“foundation”, “basis”) is used to emphasize the “ABC women”'s Chineseness and to suggest that it is this trait which is most fundamental and serves to define them. At the same time, the article praises their blending of Chinese and foreign traits as an important asset in today's globalized world:

“异国文化给了她们广阔的人生空间，传统的根基在她们身上找到了新的诠释。在这个越来越国际化的世界，这样的她们拥有的是一种竞争力，而这种竞争力和魄力对你、对我，对每一个奋斗着的女人同样重要。”

“A foreign culture endowed them with a large life space, and traditional roots found in their beings new interpretations. In this more and more internationalized world, such women as they are have competi-

¹⁰ Xu Bing 许并, Abao 阿鲍. “ABC nüren de weitaming ABCD...” (ABC 女人的维他命 ABCD..., Vitamins ABCD of the ABC Women). 《时尚 *Cosmopolitan*》, 2003/06(158), pp. 94-98.

tive power. Their competitive power and audacity are equally important to you, to me or any woman striving [for her own ideals].”

In their subsequent argumentation, the article’s authors skilfully move between the two opposite poles (foreignness and Chineseness) already stated at the beginning.

Cultural remoteness is used to promote certain values and to criticize certain traits of Chinese women. The three “ABC women” collate their own beliefs, attitudes and patterns of behaviour with those they have observed in their Chinese friends and workmates. They speak from a Western perspective, as they ascribe the values they discuss to that part of their personality which was moulded by Western upbringing. The items they mention are presented below:

Western	Chinese
<p><u>Individualism: “I” at the center</u> 尊重自己的感受，过真正属于自己的生活 Respecting your own feelings, living a life that really belongs to yourself.</p>	<p><u>Women perceived as social roles</u> 女儿、妻子、母亲；同事、下属、朋友 [...] 大多数中国女人纠缠在这些角色当中 Daughter, wife, mother; colleague, subordinate, friend [...] most Chinese women are entangled in these roles.</p>
<p><u>Using oneself as standard for value judgment</u> 没有什么比自己的感觉更重要 There is nothing more important than one’s own feelings. 在ABC心中，“对得起自己”是一条绝对的人生准则 “Not letting yourself down” is the absolute standard in an ABC’s life.</p>	<p><u>Acting in response to others’ expectations</u> 为了家庭放弃自己的兴趣，为了别人羡慕的眼光而做着一份工作 [They] renounce their own interests for the sake of [their] families, [they] do their job for the admiration reflected in other people’s eyes. 国内的女孩子做很多事情好像不是为自己，也不是由自己决定 It seems that there are many situations in which Chinese girls do not act for themselves, neither do they decide by themselves. 她们的选择是别人做的 Their choices are made by others.</p>
<p><u>Marriage as one aspect of women’s lives</u> 婚姻也只是人生的一种选择而已。我们接受与否，与旁人无关。 Marriage is but one of the choices one makes in one’s life. Whether we make this choice or not has nothing to do with other people.</p>	<p><u>Marriage and motherhood as women’s destiny</u> 女人从小就被告知，婚姻是她们最终的归宿 Women are told since childhood that marriage is their ultimate haven.</p>

<p><u>No age limits for women</u> 这个世界没有什么事情是太老的 There is nothing in this world you could be too old for.</p>	<p><u>Time pressure: the age of thirty as limit</u> 认定自己就该在30岁之前结婚生子的中国女友 My Chinese girl friends, who have set their mind on getting married and having children before they turn thirty.</p>
<p><u>Independence</u> 从小我就已经学会自己照顾自己了，根本不用别人来照顾我！要是有个男人现在愿意来养我，我根本不可去接受他，我会觉得愧对自己。 Since childhood, I learned how to take care of myself; I have no need to be cared for by others at all! If there was a man who wanted to provide for me right now, I definitely wouldn't accept, as I would feel that this brings shame to me.</p>	<p><u>Exceedingly relying on others</u> 国内女孩子的动手能力、独立完成项目的的能力都还是很不够 Chinese girls are to a great extent unable to start acting and fulfil tasks independently. 寻找一张“长期饭票”仍然是许多中国女孩的最终目标 (Continuation of the fragment on the left) finding a “long-term meal-ticket” is still the ultimate goal for many Chinese girls.</p>

The criticism voiced by the “ABC women” is directed against those deeply embedded personality traits of the Chinese that are part of their Confucian cultural heritage: viewing people not as unique individuals, but from the angle of social roles they perform, valuing the community over the individual, or perceiving marriage and giving birth to offspring as women’s destiny. Such criticism fits into *Shishang’s* editorial policy. Although it does not aim at condemning Confucian tradition, ever since its establishment this magazine set out to promote a new model of womanhood, which it aspired to place within the context of global modernity. Its issues from 2002-2003 and later depict Chinese women who have actually achieved this goal: they are globally mobile and have acquired features that qualify them as “global middle class”. Moreover, the value of individualism upheld by the “ABC women” is not something alien to contemporary China. Lisa Rofel (2007) speaks of a new form of subjectivity that has emerged at the end of the 20th century as a result of economic reforms. Young Chinese place great emphasis on the self (自我 *ziwo*) and desire: they regard personal aspirations, longings and feelings as an essential part of their lives; they speak of “self-realization”, “self-development”, and “freedom” (pp. 3-5 and 119-120). Rofel’s female interviewees even mentioned conflicts between their need for self-realization and commitments to marriage and children (p. 120). Desire and consumption are also the means by which young Chinese transcend locality and imagine themselves as cosmopolitan subjects (p. 118). Desiring as a cultural practice has also found its way into public and official discourse, where

“this desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China” (p. 3). What the “ABC women” advocate is, in fact, both in tune with the magazine’s own agenda and (very likely) already part of its readers’ everyday lives. One may wonder, therefore, why these ideas had to be expressed from a non-Chinese perspective, as a set of cultural differences.

Nevertheless, the attack on Chinese values is, as can be noticed, quite harsh. The new values advocated by the “ABC women” may be relevant for the magazine’s white-collar female readers, who may perceive the traditional model of womanhood as outdated. However, these readers may also still subscribe to traditional cultural values, at least to some extent, whether consciously or not. Moreover, the magazine also has to consider its more conservative (or older) readership, for whom the traditional model is all the more significant. Increasing cultural distance by presenting the above arguments from a Western perspective has several advantages. By separating the two patterns of behaviour and ascribing each of them to a different kind of subject, the article’s authors can write about new aspects of womanhood which are relevant in China, while at the same time avoiding tensions that exist within the local context, caused by the conflict between tradition and modernity. For more conservative readers, new values can be easier to accept if they are placed against a foreign background. To readers who support the values upheld by the “ABC women”, the authors offer a glimpse into a parallel modernity in which centering on the self does not trigger negative emotions or conflicts with other values. The parallel model of modernity presented in the article is Western, a model which in China is often positively valued and eagerly emulated. The “ABC women” speak from a position of authority which is external, and thus possibly more objective: as non-Chinese, they are more likely to notice differences between themselves and the Chinese, and problems with the beliefs and behaviour of the latter.

On the other hand, the fact that the “ABC women” are also Chinese makes their criticism more palatable and can serve as counter-argument for possible accusations of its being unfounded due to insufficient understanding of China’s actual condition. Moreover, when they approach possibly dangerous territory, the article’s authors apply the opposite strategy: they decrease cultural distance. After the fragment in which the “ABC women” persuade that the thirties should not be regarded as the absolute end of young age and prospects for marriage, the authors feel the need to emphasize these women’s serious approach to relationships and sex, which is attributed to the influence of Chinese culture and contrasted with Western permissiveness:

“Cindy 和 Christine 对感情的专一着实让我们大吃一惊。因为，我们往往把在西方长大的她们当做前卫的性爱先锋。然而，事实上，无论是 Christine、Cindy，还是冯克琳，她们在感情问题上却坚持着传统的概念。“婚外情、性开放？那样好吗？我不觉得。[...]” [...] 夹在东西方两种文化间的 ABC 女人，这一次却选择了比较‘中国’的方式。”

“Cindy and Christine’s single-mindedness in love really surprised us. This is because we often associate them, women who grew up in the West, with the avant-garde of sexual love. However, Christine, Cindy and Feng Kelin actually hold traditional views in matters of love. ‘Extra-marital affairs, sexual liberation? Are they good things? I don’t think so [...]’. [...] This time, the ABC women, placed in between Eastern and Western culture, chose a rather ‘Chinese’ approach.”

Both Confucianism and the so-called “socialist spiritual civilization” in China attach much weight to morality. Since morality is such an essential aspect of individual behaviour and social interaction, pointing out the “ABC women”’s Chineseness in this respect is, again, emphasizing a fundamental trait that marks them as members of the Chinese cultural community – indeed their very “roots”, mentioned at the beginning of the article. This further enhances these women’s credibility and maintains their argumentation within the limits of acceptability. By openly dissociating the “ABC women” from sexual promiscuity, the authors can score as many as three points. They signal readers that the criticism of “Chinese ways” will not go so far as to challenge commonly held moral principles. At the same time, by making the “ABC women” openly condemn sexual liberation, the authors also stress the magazine’s political correctness – according to current legal regulations, the media cannot promote sexual liberation and sexual freedom.¹¹ Moreover, by attributing conformity with proper moral standards to the influence of Chinese culture, the article scores a goal over the West and tickles its readers’ national pride.

¹¹ See for instance “Temporary Regulations on Establishing Partial Standards for Defining Publications That Should Be Banned” (关于部分应取缔出版物认定标准的暂行规定 *Guanyu bufen ying qudi chubanwu rending biao zhun de zanxing guiding*), promulgated by the General Administration of Press and Publication in 1989. Retrieved from <http://www.people.com.cn/electric/flfg/d4/89u03.html> (April 26, 2013).

Women's age and relationships

In the last article to be analyzed in this paper¹², the strategy of manipulating cultural distance is once again employed in the form of cultural remoteness. The text is about women in their thirties who eagerly initiate short-term love affairs with younger men, and shows that women of that age do not lose their sex-appeal. None of the women mentioned in the article is Chinese.

The author puts in an unfavourable light the idea that the age of thirty is the upper limit of a woman's youth. He does so by associating this idea with Japan, a country with negative connotations in China for reasons related to the two countries' modern history:

“我喜欢蜡笔小新，但不喜欢他说他29岁的妈妈是“欧巴桑”。日本对女性的审美观真是偏执，29岁，居然就成了老太婆！”

“I like Crayon Shin-chan, but I don't like it when he calls his 29-year-old mother *obāsan* [i.e. '(silly) old lady']. The Japanese are really unyielding in their judgment of women: I say, at the age of 29 you've already turned into an old woman!”

The pattern of behaviour depicted in the article, based on self-confidence and sexual hedonism, is definitely placed in a culturally distant context. It is illustrated with examples of European and American women, which include Hollywood actresses in their forties, who use botox to smooth out their wrinkles, actress Gwyneth Paltrow, who changes boyfriends like evening dresses, or the situation in Great Britain, where (according to the article) half of all babies are born outside marriage. The most readily available example, and thus discussed in greatest detail, is the narrator's friend, a woman by the Western-sounding name of 黛比 Daibi (Debbie?), very happy in her casual relationship with a younger man, who is a blue-collar worker. The message conveyed by the article is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems to challenge the belief that women's life ends when they turn thirty. On the other hand, however, the examples that should prove the opposite are probably unacceptable to Chinese readers. This may be due to the article's general humorous tone, and its intended effect may be (again) to appeal to the readers' nationalist feelings. The extreme images created for each belief and pattern of behaviour (the age of thirty as the end of youth vs. sexual hedonism), and

¹² Li Mengsu 李孟苏. “Wo yao zuo ge Dirtysomething, zai ye bu zuo Thirtysomething” (做 dirtysomething. 我要做个 Dirtysomething, 再也不做 Thirtysomething, Being Dirtysomething. I Want To Be a Dirtysomething, and No Longer Thirtysomething). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 2003/04(154), p. 288.

the placement of these images against foreign backgrounds may have the effect of causing the readers' contentment with being Chinese, and as such belonging to none of these two extremes.

Conclusions

The above discussion shows that *Shishang* can hardly be accused of blindly worshipping the West and not reflecting local realities. On the contrary, it reflects various profound changes that have taken place in China and have affected women's perception of themselves, as well as their positioning within society and in relation to the opposite sex. The magazine presents its readers with an image of womanhood that is modern, deeply anchored in the local and well-versed in functioning within the global at the same time. It offers them an imagined space for experiments in which relevant, but controversial issues can be viewed from many angles, and tensions can be intensified or appeased, with no serious consequences for the readers' actual lives (Larkin, 1997, pp. 414–415). Article authors are skilled at making full use of the argumentative potential of these two kinds of geographical and symbolic space – local and global, Chinese and foreign – and at opportunistically playing the right chords according to their needs: they appeal both to the readers' potential admiration and to their disdain towards the West. The latter case is quite significant. If *Shishang* cannot be said to err on the side of thoughtlessly following Western models with no heed for its readers' needs, it can, however, be accused of reproducing and reinforcing negative stereotypes of the West. One of them is the perception of the West as a land of sexual promiscuity, quite common in China and played upon in two of the articles analyzed in this paper. These are not the only texts contained in *Shishang* that reinforce this stereotype: in a reply to a topic for discussion proposed by the editor (the possibility of having a relationship with a foreigner)¹³, a reader puts this more bluntly:

“从来没觉得老外有什么国籍优势，谁知道他是 Mr Right 还是 Mr Aids，总之巨大的文化差异让我不敢冒然对异国恋情做尝试。”

“I never thought that being a foreigner gave you any advantage, who knows if he'll turn out to be Mr Right or Mr AIDS. In any case, because of enormous cultural differences I do not dare to try and throw myself into a love affair with someone from another country.”

¹³ “Wangshang duzhe dianping – Laowai shi bu shi Mr Right?” (网上读者点评——老外是不是 Mr Right?, Readers' Online Forum – Is a Foreigner Mr Right?). 《时尚 Cosmopolitan》, 2002/12(146), p. 30.

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